

Thirty Minutes with the "Irish Republic"



A Lecture by
Rev. M. J. Whelan

OTTAWA. MARCH THE FIFTEENTH
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN

DA962

W45

NATIONAL LIBRARY
CANADA
BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE

Requiem of "Easter Week"

Pray every man in his abode
And let the church bells toll,
For those who did not know the road,
But only saw the goal.

Let there be weeping in the land,
And Charity of mind
For those who did not understand,
Because their love was blind.

Their errant scheme that we condemn,
All perished at a touch;
But much should be forgiven them
Because they loved much.

Let no harsh tongue applaud their fate,
Or their clean names decry;
The men who had no strength to wait,
But only strength to die.

Come all ye to their requiem,
Who gave all men can give,
And be ye slow to follow them,
And hasty to forgive.

And let each man in his abode,
Pray for each dead man's soul,
Of those who did not know the road,
But only saw the goal.

—Ireland, N.Y.

“WHO FEARS TO SPEAK OF EASTER WEEK?”

Well nigh a hundred years before Patrick H. Pearse published through the streets of Dublin his fatuous Proclamation as President of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic, John MacHale, afterwards Archbishop of Tuam, issued from the seclusion of Maynooth College a series of momentous Letters to the English People on the state of Ireland and the causes of its discontent.

It is the same old problem that confronts the Empire today:—Whether England and Ireland shall go on fighting each other to death, or find some right basis of reconciliation and mutual support.

The cardinal point of MacHale's national and political creed was this:

“Sure on both nations the same star has shone,
Joint are their fates, their destinies are one.”

Whatever, said he, may be the visions of some romantic lovers of country, it is one of the soundest and most incontestable maxims of political science, that there are some countries whose fortunes must ever be dependent on the destinies of others. This principle which experience has confirmed in the example of other countries, seems peculiarly applicable to the condition of Ireland. To the strength and abundance of her natural resources, I feel proud in bearing ample testimony; but as these must be estimated in relation to surrounding states, it must be confessed that she seems to have been destined to be connected in some measure with the English nation. Though this reflection may be mortifying to our national vanity, we should be consoled by the consciousness that we could securely repose under the protection of the British Empire, instead of being placed in the doubtful position of Anactorum, which, if we are to credit the account of Thucydides, was disputed by the contending claims of Corinth and Coreyra.

This obvious principle has taken deep root in the Irish mind. We know that it is the dispensation of Providence,

that one kingdom should share the adverse or prosperous fortunes of another. We know that our fate is connected with that of England, and that in "the peace thereof shall our peace be."

The insignificant size of England, compared to Continental states, as well as its nearness to Ireland, proves equally the advantages of a political union with Ireland, in order to be able to cope successfully against the encroachments of greater powers. The union, then, which nature and their geographical position suggest, is one of mutual justice and protection. • • •

Britain boasts, above all other nations, of the spirit of justice that presides over all her institutions. There is a justice which not only one individual is obliged to observe towards another, but by which nations too are bound; and principally the legislators of any empire towards its dependant connexions. The sacrifice of any portion of an empire, and the detention of those common benefits of the State, to the support of which all contribute, is deemed by the best authorities on jurisprudence, an act of flagrant injustice, when such a sacrifice is not necessary to the interests of the whole. On what grounds of justice, then, can an entire nation be still deprived of those civil privileges that are deemed the birth-right of a British subject, when all pretences on account of which those rights were first withdrawn, have long since disappeared? • • • • While Britain extends her commerce over the world, and diffuses with it the improvements of her arts, the protection of her arms, and the lights of her literature, the high character which she affects for piety and justice is tarnished by the harshness of her treatment to this country. As long as Ireland remains in her present condition, the interference of Britain in the concerns of other countries, will be deemed less an evidence of her humanity than her ambition. If she interposes in the defence of an injured people, her policy will be considered the result of a selfish wish to secure her distant possessions, in which justice has no share, nor can she ever claim the proud distinction of being the avenger of freedom, while the slavery of the Irish people exposes in the eyes of mankind the fallacy of her pretensions.

It is worthy of note that when the author of these Letters, this sane Unionist and true Imperialist, was nominated to fill the

vacant See of Tuam, the Government of the day, with characteristic *gaucherie*, despatched agents to Rome to protest against the appointment. Whereupon Pope Gregory XVI aptly remarked, "Is it not strange that since the passing of the Catholic Relief Bill you are meddling more than ever in these matters?"

Between MacHale and Pearce—the patriot statesman and the patriot visionary—rolls almost a century replete with forceful arguments and fervid appeals for self-government, futile only because of the stupor of the British democracy and the furor of the British oligarchy, culminating in the challenge launched last Easter week—a challenge of madmen if you like—to the greatest Empire in the world, at the very moment of its gravest crisis, upon the most fundamental portion of its policy of interference with the affairs of the continent, namely, England's claims to be the champion of small nationalities.

So much by way of prologue. Now, let the curtain be raised on the Tragedy of Easter Week by St. John G. Ervine, the well-known Dublin play-wright, who was an interested but innocent spectator:—

One may wonder why the rebellion took place, seeing that Home Rule had in law been conceded to Ireland, and that the Irish people were expressly excluded from the scope of the Military Service Act. The answer to such speculation is that the great majority of the Irish Volunteers firmly believed that the Home Rule Act would be annulled after the War. They were convinced that the Liberal government would quit office on the conclusion of peace, and be succeeded by a Conservative government which would make as little of the Home Rule Act as the Germans made of the Treaty guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium; and they were confirmed in this belief by the tone of an obstinate English newspaper. A further factor was the treatment of the Irish regiments in Gallipoli, where, although they bore the brunt of the fighting, they were disregarded by the command in a thoroughly incomprehensible manner. One of the strange features of the Gallipoli campaign is the fact that Admiral de Robeck forgot to mention the names of the Irish regiments which took heroic part in landing on the peninsula, although he remembered to mention the names of all the other regiments concerned in it! The causes, then, which led up to the rebellion were many and varied, but the dominant cause was this suspicion that once

again the English Government was about to betray the Irish people. I belong to a school of Irish Home-Rulers who believe that the destinies of Ireland and England in the world are as inseparable as the waters of the Liffey and the Mersey in the Irish Sea, and I do not believe that these suspicions of English perfidy were justified; but I can readily understand why men of an impatient temperament, in whose minds the wrongs of their country had made an indelible impression, were quick to suspect treachery where they should have seen only the petulance of irresponsible and impotent politicians and journalists.

I wonder if Mr. Ervine is of the same mind today, viewing as he must another broken pledge—another violated treaty.

Those who were in Sackville Street, at noon on Easter Monday, 1916, writes Howard-Redmond, nephew of the Irish Parliamentary Leader, witnessed a scene which for dramatic setting and for paradoxical conception is certainly the most extraordinary of any of the long line of rebellions in Ireland; for at a time when it seemed almost universally admitted that "Separatism" was from an economic, racial and military point of view impossible, there suddenly arose, without warning as if from nowhere, a body of men, fully armed and completely organized, who within the space of a single hour had captured every strategic point in the Capital, and held it up in the name of the new Republic.

The General Post Office was taken without a struggle and made Head-quarters of the Provisional Government; and presently came forth a herald who, from the base of Nelson's Pillar, proclaimed the new Charter of Liberty. He read it with deep emotion to a pack of squabbling women and children, emitted from the vile slums of the city for a riotous holiday, and he had hardly half-finished the document when suddenly there was a crash followed by the sound of breaking glass. At once the crowd turned round and looked in the direction whence it came, and one old woman exclaimed with delight, "Hoo-roosh! they're raidin' Noblet's Toffee Shop!"—and not knowing what the Proclamation was about, and caring not a straw for King or President, for English Rule or Irish Republic, the mob rushed at once to partake in the orgy of sweet-meats which came tumbling out into the street. It was to me, says Mr. Redmond, the saddest picture of the whole revolution—typical of much of the pathos which crowned this mixture of comedy and tragedy.

The menace of pillage by such roisterly denizens brought upon the scene early next morning the proto-martyr of Easter Week.

He is seen walking hastily towards O'Connell Bridge, dressed in civilian attire, for he is, emphatically, a non-combatant. In one hand he carries a bundle of type-written papers, in the other a brush. On the Smith-O'Brien monument he pastes one of the papers, and if you draw near enough you may read this

NOTICE.

When there are no regular police on the streets, it becomes the duty of the citizens to police the streets themselves and to prevent such spasmodic looting as has taken place in a few streets. Civilians (men and women) who are willing to co-operate to this end are asked to attend at Westmoreland Chambers (over Eden Bros.) at five o'clock this (Tuesday) afternoon.

FRANCIS SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON.

St. John Ervine continues the story:—While I was standing in the street Francis Sheehy Skeffington came up to me. He had half a dozen walking-sticks under his arm, and he said to me: "I'm trying to form a special constabulary to prevent looting, you'll do for one," and he offered a walking-stick to me. I looked at the stick and I looked at the looters, and I said "No." It was characteristic of "Skeffy," as he was called in Dublin, that he should behave like that. The pacifist in him would not permit him to use force to restrain the looters, though one might have thought the logician in him would have regarded a walking-stick as a weapon; but the hero in him compelled him for the honor of his country to do something to restrain them. On the previous day he had harangued them from the top of a tram-car, reminding them that they were Irish, and bidding them not to loot for the sake of Ireland's honor; and they had stopped looting—until he had gone away. To-day his proposal was to overawe them with walking-sticks. Here indeed, I could not but think, was Don Quixote charging the wind-mills yet another time!

Poor Sheehy Skeffington was only trying to do what soldiery and constabulary were too cowardly to attempt. That same evening he was taken by a frenzied military officer, and brutally murdered in Portobello Barracks—the foulest deed of Easter Week, and none blacker in all the annals of Prussianized Belgium.

To the utter amazement of Dublin itself and the outside world as well, the insurgents for two full days held undisputed possession of the General Post Office and other strategic points, although clearly outnumbered by the troops then quartered in Dublin and a large force of Metropolitan Police.

On the third day heavy reinforcements of infantry and artillery arrived from England, a gunboat ascended the Liffey, and martial law was proclaimed for all Ireland.

On the fourth day more troops arrived, and the rebels were bombed out of some of their strongholds.

On the fifth day, when he realized the hopelessness of his position, the President of the Provisional Government issued a Bulletin which is well worth reading and conserving as an official narration of the Rise and Fall of the Republic:—

Head Quarters, G.P.O., Dublin,

28th April, 1916, 9.30 a.m.

The Forces of the Irish Republic, which was proclaimed in Dublin on Easter Monday, 24th April, have been in possession of the central part of the capital since 12 noon on that day. Up to yesterday afternoon Headquarters was in touch with all the main outlying positions, and, despite furious and almost continuous assaults by the British Forces, all these positions were then still being held, and the commandants in charge were confident of their ability to hold them for a long time.

During the course of yesterday afternoon and evening the enemy succeeded in cutting our communications with our other positions in the city, and Headquarters is to-day isolated.

The enemy has burnt down whole blocks of houses, apparently with the object of giving themselves a clear field for the play of artillery and field guns against us. We have been bombarded during the evening and night by shrapnel and machine-gun fire, but without material damage to our position, which is of great strength.

We are busy completing arrangements for the final defence of Headquarters, and are determined to hold it while the buildings last.

I desire now, lest I may not have an opportunity later, to pay homage to the gallantry of the soldiers of Irish Freedom, who have, during the past four days, been writing with fire and steel the most glorious chapter in the latter history of Ireland. Justice can never be done to their heroism, to their discipline, to their gay and unconquerable spirit, in the midst of peril and death.

Let me, who have led them into this, speak, in my own and in my fellow-commanders' names, and in the name of Ireland present and to come, their praise, and ask those who come after them to remember them.

For four days they have fought, and toiled, almost without cessation, almost without sleep, and in the intervals of fighting, they have sung songs of the freedom of Ireland. No man has complained; no man has asked "why?" Each individual has spent himself, happy to pour out his strength for Ireland and for freedom. If they do not win the fight, they will at least have deserved to win it. But win it they will, although they may win it in death. Already they have won a great thing. They have redeemed Dublin from many shames, and made her name splendid among the names of cities.

If I were to mention names of individuals, my list would be a long one.

I will name only that of Commandant-General James Connolly, commanding the Dublin division. He lies wounded, but is still the guiding brain of our resistance.

If we accomplish no more than we have accomplished, I am satisfied. I am satisfied that we have saved Ireland's honour. I am satisfied that we should have accomplished the task of enthroning, as well as proclaiming, the Irish Republic as a Sovereign State, had our arrangements for a simultaneous rising of the whole country, with a combined plan as sound as the Dublin plan has proved to be, been allowed to go through on Easter Sunday. Of the fatal countermanding order which prevented those plans from being carried out I shall not speak further. Both Eoin MacNeill and we have acted in the best interests of Ireland.

For my part, as to anything I have done in this, I am not afraid to face either the judgment of God, or the judgment of posterity.

(Signed),

P. H. PEARSE, Commandant-General, Commanding-in-Chief of the Army of the Irish Republic, and President of the Provisional Government.

On the sixth day he ordered a general surrender in the following terms:—

In order to prevent the further slaughter of Dublin citizens, and in the hope of saving the lives of our followers now surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered, the members of the Provisional Government present at Headquarters have agreed to unconditional surrender, and the Commandants of the various districts in the City and Country will order their commands to lay down arms.

(Signed) P. H. PEARSE.

29th April, 1916, 3.45 p.m.

Then followed in funeral procession, surrenders, reprisals, deportations, imprisonments, executions;—and still the oldest problem of the greatest Empire in the world remains unsolved.

The author of the "The Crock of Gold" and other widely-read books, James Stephens, who was an eye-witness of the unequal struggle between the forces of the Crown and those of the Republic, has written a candid appreciation of some of the Insurgent leaders, their aims and motives:—

The Insurrection, he says, like all its historical forerunners, has been quelled in blood. It sounds rhetorical to say so, but it was not quelled in peaseoup or tisane. While it lasted the fighting was very determined, and it is easily, I think, the most considerable of Irish rebellions.

The country was not with it, for be it remembered that a whole army of Irishmen, possibly three hundred thousand of our race, are fighting with England instead of against her. In Dublin alone there is scarcely a poor home in which a father, a brother, or a son is not serving in one of the many fronts which England is defending. Had the country risen, and fought as stubbornly as the Volunteers did, no troops could have beaten them—well that is a wild statement, the heavy guns could always beat them—but from whatever angle Irish people consider this affair it must appear to them tragic and lamentable beyond expression, but not mean and not unheroic.

It was hard enough that our men in the English armies should be slain for causes which no amount of explanation will ever render less foreign to us, or even intelligible; but that our men who were left should be killed in Ireland fight.

ing against the same England that their brothers are fighting for ties the question into such knots of contradiction as we may give up trying to unravel. We can only think—this has happened—and let it unhappen itself as best it may.

We say that the time always finds the man, and by it we mean: that when a responsibility is toward there will be found some shoulder to bend for the yoke which all others shrink from. It is not always nor often the great ones of the earth who undertake these burdens—it is usually the good folk, that gentle hierarchy who swear allegiance to mournfulness and the under dog, as others dedicate themselves to mutton chops and the easy nymph. It is not my intention to idealise any of the men who were concerned in this rebellion. Their country will, some few years hence, do that as adequately as she has done it for those who went before them.

Those of the leaders whom I knew were not great men, nor brilliant—that is they were more scholars than thinkers, and more thinkers than men of action; and I believe that in no capacity could they have attained to what is called eminence, nor do I consider they coveted any such public distinction as is noted in that word.

But in my definition they were good men—men, that is, who willed no evil, and whose movements of body or brain were unselfish and healthy. No person living is the worse off for having known Thomas MacDonagh, and I, at least, have never heard MacDonagh speak unkindly or even harshly of any thing that lived. It has been said of him that his lyrics were epical; in a measure it is true and it is true in the same measure that his death was epical. He was the first of the leaders who was tried and shot. It was not easy for him to die leaving behind two young children and a young wife, and the thought that his last moment must have been tormented by their memory is very painful. We are all fatalists when we strike against power, and I hope he put care from him as the soldiers marched him out.

The O'Rahilly also I knew, but not intimately, and I can only speak of a good humour, a courtesy, and an energy that never failed. He was a man of unceasing ideas and unceasing speech, and laughter accompanied every sound made by his lips.

Plunkett and Pearse I knew also, but not intimately. Young Plunkett, as he was always called, would never strike one as a militant person. He, like Pearse and MacDonagh, wrote verse, and it was no better nor worse than their's were. He had an appetite for quaint and difficult knowledge. He studied Egyptian and Sanscrit, and distant curious matter of that sort, and was interested in inventions and the theatre. He was tried and sentenced and shot.

As to Pearse (who conducted a private school for boys), I do not know how to place him, nor what to say of him. If there was an idealist among the men concerned in this insurrection it was he, and if there was any person in the world less fitted to head an insurrection it was he also. I never could "touch" or sense in him the qualities which other men spoke of, and which made him military commandant of the rising. None of these men were magnetic in the sense that Mr. Larkin is magnetic, and I would have said that Pearse was less magnetic than any of the others. Yet it was to him and around him they clung.

Men must find some centre either of power or action or intellect about which they may group themselves, and I think that Pearse became the leader because his temperament was more profoundly emotional than any of the others. He was emotional not in a flighty, but in a serious way, and one felt more that he suffered than that he enjoyed.

He had a power; men who came into intimate contact with him began to act differently to their own desires and interests. His schoolmasters did not always receive their salaries with regularity. The reason that he did not pay them was the simple one that he had no money. Given by another man this explanation would be uneconomic, but from him it was so logical that even a child could comprehend it. These masters did not always leave him. They remained, marveling perhaps, and accepting, even with stupefaction, the theory that children must be taught, but that no such urgency is due towards the payment of wages. One of his boys said there was no fun in telling lies to Mr. Pearse, for, however outrageous the lie, he always believed it. He built and renovated and improved his school because the results were good for his scholars, and somehow he found builders to undertake these forlorn hopes.

It was not, I think, that he "put his trust in God," but that when something had to be done he did it, and entirely disregarded logic or economics or force. He said—such a thing has to be done and so far as one man can do it I will do it, and he bowed straightaway to the task.

It is mournful to think of men like these having to take charge of bloody and desolate work, and one can imagine them say, "Oh! cursed spite," as they accepted responsibility. * * *

The English mind may to-day be enabled to understand what is wrong with us, and why through centuries we have been "disthressful." Let them look at us, I do not say through the fumes that are still rising from our ruined streets, but through the smoke that is rolling from the North Sea to Switzerland, and read in their own souls the justification for all our risings and for this rising.

Is it wrong to say that England has not one friend in Europe? I say it. Her Allies of to-day were her enemies of yesterday, and politics alone will decide what they will be tomorrow. I say it, and yet I am not entirely right, for she has one possible friend unless she should decide that even one friend is excessive and irks her. That one possible friend is Ireland. I say, and with assurance, that if our national questions are arranged there will remain no reason for enmity between the two countries, and there will remain many reasons for friendship. * * *

I believe that what is known as the "mastery of the seas" will, when the great war is finished, pass irretrievably from the hands or the ambition of any nation, and that more urgently than ever in her history England will have need of a friend. It is true that we might be her enemy and might do her some small harm—it is truer that we could be her friend, and could be of very real assistance to her.

I have spoken to-night as a Canadian to Canadians, and I venture to assert that Canada is, and the whole Empire ought to be, as deeply concerned about the fate of Ireland as about the fate of Serbia, or Roumania, or Poland, or even Belgium, after the war. If I err in so asserting, so believing, then Ireland is not the only small nationality within the Empire that is to be pitied. If in this day of wrath, this woeful day, we rest mere mourners over Ireland

in her bondage, I fancy I hear from her torn heart the prophetic cry: "Weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children."

Aye, God save Ireland, say we all! God save Canada too, lest beguiled by some sinister "Round Table" policy, she surrender the soul of nationhood, and be content to subsist a shrivelled Colonial Dame! God save the Empire from the inflation of a worse than German "Kultur;" and God save the King in his Privy Council Chamber from the infamous kiss of betrayal!

